



SUCCESS STORY

Illuminating Ethnic Harmony

Improved lighting at mosque and church brightens eastern Bulgarian town



St. Ivan Rilski Church (above) and Saat Mosque (below) in Targovishte shine with a different light now.



Photos: Partners Targovishte Association

Bulgaria is often cited for the relative harmony among the country's different ethnic and religious groups, even during the difficult post-communism transition period. Communication among different groups in the country however is not perfect. Groups may proclaim tolerance and acceptance on a rhetorical level, but in everyday life relations are not necessarily close. This prompted a network of organizations and individuals in the eastern Bulgarian city of Targovishte to implement a project called "Svetlina" ("Light"). The project provided the 20th-century St. Ivan Rilski Church and the 18th-century Saat Mosque with external lighting, thus illuminating the spiritual centers of Targovishte so as to carry out their ritual functions comfortably.

Partners-Targovishte Association and its mediation center, established under the USAID Interethnic Interaction Program implemented by the Partners Bulgaria Foundation, initiated the project. The Municipality of Targovishte, the church board, the mosque board, and local NGOs joined efforts to develop the proposal and secure funding. The budget totaled \$4,500 and the applicants contributed \$1,400, thanks to the participation of the municipality.

The project made the city center more attractive and the joint work of all the parties demonstrated tolerance and good relations between the Christian and Muslim communities. This prompted local religious leaders to invoke references to light as a metaphor of hope and inner peace illuminating people's paths on their quest for truth.

"On the day of its 70th anniversary, St. Ivan Rilski Church radiated light," said clergyman Slavcho Prodanov. "It shone like a beacon for those lost in the sea of despair to the cherished shore of calmness and harmony."

"The mosque shines magnificently with a light that illuminates our souls," added Imam-Hatip Oktay Hashim. "When I saw it, I knew that even the greatest skeptics had perceived the benefits of the Svetlina Project. Its very title is a precise expression of our state of mind. I am proud to serve in a temple where the artistic and architectural lighting contributes to an improved environment. This is the way to preserve the religious temples of cultural and historical value."

The two boards will continue to maintain the architectural lighting systems and the Municipality of Targovishte will cover the expenses for electricity.